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### COVID-19

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<https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m1213/rapid-responses>

**Responding to**

<https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m1213>

**27 March 2020**

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Europe's migrant containment policies threaten the response to covid-19: Undocumented migrants are probably at the greatest risk of all

Dear Editor

Undocumented migrants are probably at the greatest risk of all

Hargreaves et al have pinpointed the challenges in meeting the needs of migrants, particularly those in refugee camps. However, there is a group of migrants--those undocumented (also known as irregular, or in a derogatory and inaccurate way illegal)--at even greater need. People who are undocumented do not have legal rights to residence in the country they are in. They are in danger of becoming the scapegoats, when they are going to be the victims. For self-evident reasons the numbers of such people are unknown but immigration authorities usually judge the numbers to be substantial, for example with estimates in the hundreds of thousands in the UK.

This group is at particularly high risk for obvious reasons including: there is no prior bond of trust with the authorities; no bridge for communication of information through the public sector; and possibly no capacity to observe the two-metre and other social distancing guidance relating to workplaces and homes; and minimal rights to health care. These obstacles apply globally. The needs of this population are usually provided by voluntary, charitable, non-governmental organisations.

The needs of this population is a sensitive topic and opening up an objective dialogue is difficult at any time but problematic in the midst of a national emergency. In some places xenophobia and racism are already evident. Early statistical and anecdotal evidence indicates that the pandemic is affecting all migrant and ethnic minority groups badly but statistical information about undocumented migrants is not available.

The Migrant and Ethnic Health Section of the European Public Health Association, comprising of more than 1800 people, has issued a statement. In this statement, there are potential core elements of actions to protect undocumented (as well as all other) migrants including as follows:

‘Inclusion of all MEM (migrant and ethnic minority groups) in Europe into the ongoing protective measures, information campaigns and health services provision is essential. We call for temporary suspension of any policies that may exclude migrants from accessing these measures. It is imperative that no one should feel under the threat of prosecution or deportation during this period and safeguards need to be in place.’

The full statement provides the context:

[https://eupha.org/repository/advocacy/MIG\\_statement\\_on\\_COVID19.pdf](https://eupha.org/repository/advocacy/MIG_statement_on_COVID19.pdf)

The organisation PICUM which represents a platform for those working on behalf of undocumented migrants has also released a statement setting out similar principles focused on undocumented migrants:

<https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Statement-March-20...>

Everyone working on the COVID-19 pandemic whether in state or international policy, planning for health care and containment, or researching on the causes, consequences and trajectory of the pandemic needs to give immediate attention to this matter.

**Competing interests:** I am a contributor to the statement referred to in this rapid response that was issued by the Migrant and Ethnic Health Section of the European Public health Association